

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 12 | Issue 3

Article 7

7-1-1995

Chrzan on Necessary Gratuitous Evil

William Hasker

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

Hasker, William (1995) "Chrzan on Necessary Gratuitous Evil," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 12 : Iss. 3 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol12/iss3/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

CHZRAN ON NECESSARY GRATUITOUS EVIL

William Hasker

Keith Chrzan claims to have found a flaw in the central argument of my essay, "The Necessity of Gratuitous Evil." I point out that Chrzan misstates my views on several key points, and argue that his comments fail to create any difficulty for my argument.

Keith Chrzan claims to have found a flaw in the central argument of my essay, "The Necessity of Gratuitous Evil," which is directed against William Rowe's evidential version of the problem of evil.¹ Unfortunately, Chrzan is mistaken in most of the views he attributes to me, and so his barbs miss their target.

Chrzan cites the following definition of gratuitous evil, implying that it is the one I employ: gratuitous evil is evil "not necessary for the creation of a greater good or the prevention of some equal or greater evil." The definition is correctly quoted from my p. 24. But on the very same page, I give a different definition, which is suggested by Rowe's argument: gratuitous evil is evil "such that an omnipotent being could have prevented it without thereby having prevented the occurrence of some greater good." It is this definition which is assumed in the crucial part of my discussion with Rowe (in the last two sections of the paper), and thus it ought to have been the basis for Chrzan's discussion of my argument.

Chrzan goes on to complain that

Hasker equivocates on the meaning of gratuitous evil. After telling us that gratuitous evil is evil not necessary for the production of greater good, Hasker argues that it is necessary for preventing the undermining of morality. If an evil is justified because morality is undermined in its absence, it is odd to construe that evil as gratuitous: preventing the undermining of morality seems like a pretty great good. (p. 135)

Contrary to Chrzan's assertion, I never say (and do not believe) that any moral evil is necessary for preventing the undermining of morality. What *is* necessary for this is *God's willingness to permit* the evil in question; whether such an evil actually occurs is up to the free agent(s) who perpetrate the evil, not to God. (It seems likely that Chrzan was led astray on this point by the title of my essay, which was deliberately paradoxical and



provocative. But if he had consulted note 10 (p. 41), he would have read: "Clearly, God might be willing to permit evils, gratuitous or otherwise, without those evils actually occurring. In view of this, the strictly correct title for this paper would be, 'The Necessity of the Possibility of Gratuitous Evil.'"")

Unfortunately, this error carries through the rest of Chrzan's discussion. On p. 136, he assumes that in order to vindicate my position I would have to defend the view that all of the evils of the Holocaust (for example) were necessary to prevent the undermining of morality, so that if even one fewer child had perished morality would have been undermined. But of course, I think no such thing. Nor do I argue that, in order to prevent the undermining of morality, it is necessary for God to have been willing to permit all of the evils of the Holocaust. The burden of my argument is simply that there is *no valid moral requirement* for God to prevent all gratuitous evil, even all "genuinely gratuitous" evil (what Chrzan calls "unnecessary gratuitous" evil). Chrzan, on the other hand, simply assumes without discussion that there is such a requirement on God; thus he fails to engage my argument.

Probably the most interesting point raised by Chrzan concerns our ability, as human beings, to know how things stand with regard to the overall level of evil in the world. In my paper, I point out (pp. 33-36) that in order for Rowe's counter-argument against me to work, it is necessary (though not sufficient) for three things to be true:

(1) There is some particular, well-defined amount of evil such that God must be willing to permit that amount of evil in order to prevent the undermining of morality, but the permission of evil beyond this would exceed what is required for that purpose.

(2) It is not possible for human beings to know, even approximately, what is the optimal level of evil which must be permitted in order to prevent the undermining of morality.

(3) We can, however, know with assurance that the evil in our actual world considerably exceeds the optimal level.

I argue in the paper (and I still believe) that it is implausible that (1)-(3) are all true. Even if we assume (as I think we should not) that (1) is true, it seems unlikely that (2) and (3) will both be true. If we make an optimistic assessment of our human ability to judge such matters, then (3) might very well be true, but (2) would most likely be false. If, on the other hand, we make a more modest (and more realistic) estimate of our human capacities, then (2) would probably be true and (3) false.

I acknowledge, in this connection, that there are indeed cases where we can know there is too much of something without being able to say what the exact right amount would be. (Thus, we have analogs for (2) and (3) which are true.) The original example, supplied by John Glenn, is that "I can...judge that a certain amount of mashed potatoes is a great deal too much to serve at a dinner for four, without being able to judge what is precisely the right amount" (p. 43, n. 27). But as I point out, this example (and I suspect others as well) has the feature that "*there does not exist any exact right amount*"—and thus the analog for (1) would be false.

Chrzan thinks there are examples that avoid this debility. It should be

noted that even if a plausible example could be constructed for which analogs of (1)-(3) are true, this would make only a modest contribution towards showing that (1), (2), and (3) are themselves true. But in fact, Chrzan has not achieved even this much. His examples concern his being late to a movie, thus learning he has delayed too long without knowing the precise starting time, and his giving his dog a fatal overdose of heartworm medication without knowing what the correct dose would be. In these cases, we do have a definite right answer, together with the knowledge that there is "too much" of something (medicine, or delay). So the analogs of (1) and (3) are true. But the analog of (2) is false in both cases. In neither case is it impossible for Chrzan to know the right answer; rather, these are instances of someone's failing to know the answer "through lack of intelligence or opportunity, or simply because of sloth" (p. 44, n. 28)—most likely the latter. Such cases give no support to Rowe's argument. And for Chrzan to invoke his "realistic" examples in this connection—such as the Holocaust and the Pol Pot massacres in Cambodia—is question-begging pure and simple. I conclude that Chrzan has not given us any reason to think that the argument of my essay is flawed.

Huntington College

NOTE

1. See Keith Chrzan, "Necessary Gratuitous Evil: An Oxymoron Revisited," *Faith and Philosophy* 11 (January 1994), pp. 134-37; and William Hasker, "The Necessity of Gratuitous Evil," *Faith and Philosophy* 9 (January 1992), pp. 23-44. Subsequent page references are to these articles.